

RECOVERY: WHAT IS IT?

How do you describe in words a process that changes your life permanently and for the better?

There are certain words that are associated with the “recovery” model:

CHOICE AND SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

We can tell you that we have come to realize that everything we do ends up being some kind of choice in one way or another and that over time, we realize that we are ultimately responsible for every choice we make from picking up a cigarette to attempting to hurt ourselves or someone else. It is the transition from feeling helpless or thinking of ourselves as victims to being accountable for our reactions and decisions. Whether we have come to this realization on our own, or through the teachings of family, teachers, friends, social workers, nurses, or doctors, the transformation that happens when we accept the responsibility of making our choices and all of the consequences of those choices is part of the foundation of the recovery process.

SELF-DETERMINATION AND EMPOWERMENT

When we start looking out for the feelings and experiences of other people but not at the expense of our own; when we expand our thinking to include the effect of our behavior on those around us and make connections that may explain how we feel and act; and when we believe that our only path to normalizing our experience is to make a commitment to ourselves that we will not give up and that we will keep trying no matter what, we will be on our journey of recovery.

RESILIENCY

Recovery from “serious and persistent mental illness” happens to us sometimes slowly and sometimes at breakneck speed which often sends us back to earlier states of mind where we retreat from accepting responsibility of our choices or the consequences thereof. It means that when we experience the negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors that prompt us to react in old, familiar, destructive ways that we find a way to stop, accept what is happening and start believing that whatever is happening will eventually change and that there is hope even at our lowest points. In other words, it is not linear with a beginning and an end and travels in a straight line from point

A to point B. It is an ebb and flow between old patterns of thought and actions and acting on faith and hope that things will always change and shift back to a more positive aspect. There are forward moves and backward falls and curves, bumps and holes. It is a journey that doesn't have a beginning or a destination. It has moments of clarity, realization and acceptance.

PEER SUPPORT AND HOPE

True recovery and empowerment cannot happen without peer support and self advocacy. This is true for people who truly have had the "consumer experience". When a person's mental health has severely impacted their life to the point that their whole identity has been defined by a label or a diagnosis and that they have experienced a treatment system including but not restricted to hospitalization or incarceration, it is imperative that peers are part of their recovery journey. Only another peer truly understands the more traumatic effects that occur from systemic treatment modalities. When we meet, watch and learn from peers who promote recovery, we gain that perspective and hope that we are capable of changing our circumstances too.

PEER ADVOCACY

Peer advocacy has to come from consumers who have achieved autonomy and independence from the restrictions that have been imposed on us by well meaning people who want to help by taking away our ability to make poor choices and learn from our mistakes. Without the opportunity to fall down or fail, we will not be able to accept ourselves as being the same as other people. We will never truly accept responsibility for the choices we make. Peer advocacy embodies it all: choice, self-responsibility, self-determination, empowerment, resiliency, peer support and hope. It has to come from the journey and experience that is inherent in the human experience. Without learning that we are capable of picking ourselves up after a fall or a mistake, we will not be able to accept that we are the same as everyone else. We have all the same feelings and thoughts that occur to others. Our thoughts, feelings and reactions may be more exaggerated and severe at times but ultimately, mental health is everyone's dilemma.

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